Gargoyles
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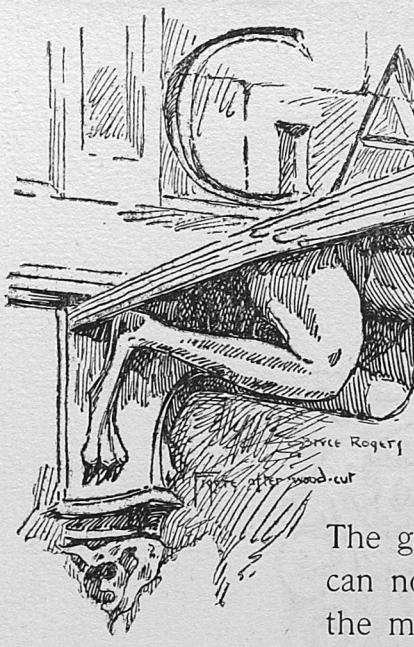
GARGOYLES



NEVER in the history of architecture has there been developed a successful decorative feature which was not originally the outgrowth of necessity. The gargoyle is not an exception to this statement. Exceptions can not be recalled at this time. The gargoyle is a marker in the march of civilization. It was a great thought and a distinct mark of regard for the common people when it was thought best to provide means of throwing the water from the roofs of great public buildings well away from their walls rather than to allow it to trickle down upon the passers by. The gargoyle had its development in a regard for human comfort. It is the kind of an idea that would breed a revolution. Consideration for human comfort and human liberty leads us to think that we are yet entitled to better things; and so an idea may move from so small a beginning as a gargoyle. The gargoyle was not the origin, but it was one of the incidents of this kind of advancement.

It was early in the thirteenth century that it was thought worth while to collect water in gutters, lead it to a projecting trough or chute and discharge it well from the wall of the building. Sure the wind might blow it back again and spatter the passers by, but there was the intention and it must be credited. It was a step toward civilization. Since the sixteenth century the utilitarian gargoyle has given place to the down spout. Originally this conductor of water from the gutter to the ground was of stone. To-day it is of tin, galvanized iron and copper.

But to go back a little. The first decorative gargoyle of the middle ages was of the year 1220, and the earliest type known is found at Laon, France. It was in two courses, the lower course, of stone, was hollowed out, above it was placed a covering and from the surplus stone of both pieces was carved in strong outlines a fantastic figure. It is very possible that the gargoyles which we now see in decorative forms were

"And every house covered was with lead,
And many gargoyle, and many hideous heads—
From the stone worke to the kenel raubt"

Lydgate's "Troy"

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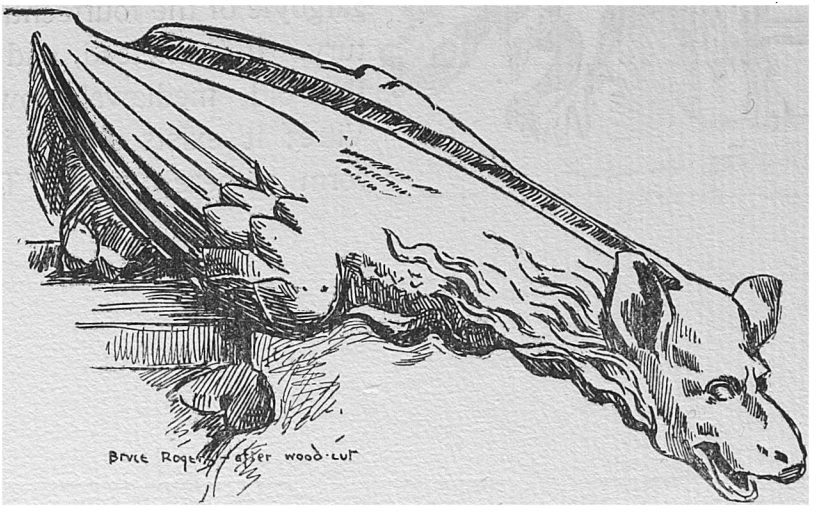
originally plain and simple in their outline, but that the artist, who was always on hand during this fruitful period, saw the opportunity for a decorative motive and immediately availed himself of it. The fertility of the sculptors of this time may be understood when we bear in mind that of the thousands upon thousands of gargoyles which were carved no two are alike. This illustrates, as well as anything, the natural irresistible impulse given to invention through the mind of a true artist. It was easier to develop a new form than to copy an old one.

"In the fyrste worke were gargylles of golde fiersely faced with spoutes runnyng" Hall's "Henry VIII"

The general structure of the gargoyle was influenced primarily by the kind of stone out of which it was made. In certain parts of the country, where there was a strong, tenacious limestone or granite, it had a long and slender projection from the building. They were always skillfully carved by sure hands. The forms were always adroitly manipulated. They were so made as to improve the silhouette of the buildings. They broke the lines of otherwise monotonous cornices, marked the ends of long and slender piers and gave character to the building.

In studying gargoyles there is a strong temptation to undertake an examination of the state of mind which led to the use of the strange and fantastic forms which were given them. But the farther one looks into it, the more natural the form of the gargoyle appears and the more far-fetched is the idea of associating these forms with an unusual condition of mind at the time of their construction. To illustrate, I will refer to the gargoyle on this page. There is a piece of stone projecting



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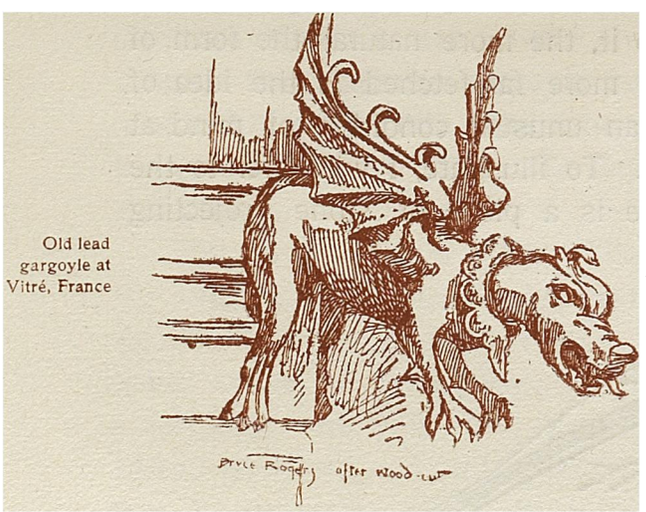
from the corner of the building with a channel cut in the top and an opening for water drilled down through the end. It was a perfectly natural conceit to give this opening the form of a mouth, and following that, representations of eyes and ears, and good strong claws holding to the wall. Often these figures were made with wings, which, considering their position, was quite natural. A figure in the position which was proper for a gargoyle suggests unusual forms. It is not so easy to account for the one used as a tail-piece to this article unless we remember that there was about a hundred years of growth and development leading to it, and in the past it has usually taken about this length of time to pass from what is logical, in a way, to develop the unusual without a high regard for the fitness of things. There is more that is merely grotesque and less of reason as we advance in the history of the gargoyle.

The one used in the title design has none of the usefulness of those which went before. It does not carry water from the building at all. It is merely intended to add to the picturesqueness of the outline without performing other service. The gargoyle from Notre Dame at Paris which we give is drawn from one of Meryon's etchings. It is a grotesque figure at the corner of a balcony, and belongs to the same class. It certainly had its origin or suggestion from the gargoyle proper. Here is given a true gargoyle of the fourteenth century. It is in lead, and from the old mediæval town of Vitré; it exists to-day in the form as here drawn. This is



Old lead gargoyle at Vitré, France

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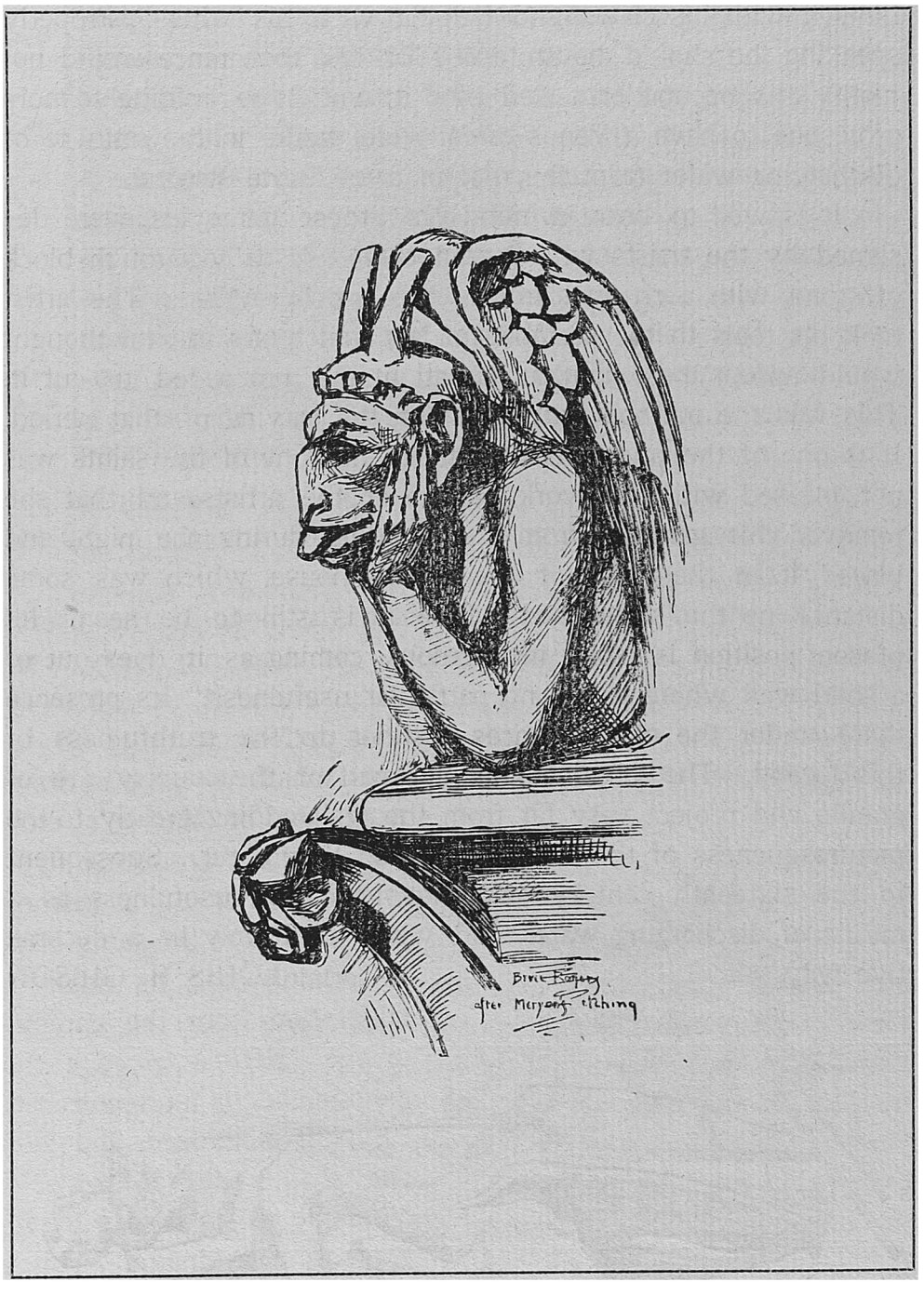
The Monster of Notre Dame overlooking Paris



"Insatiable vampire—L'Eternelle luxure
Sur la grande cité convoite sa pâture"

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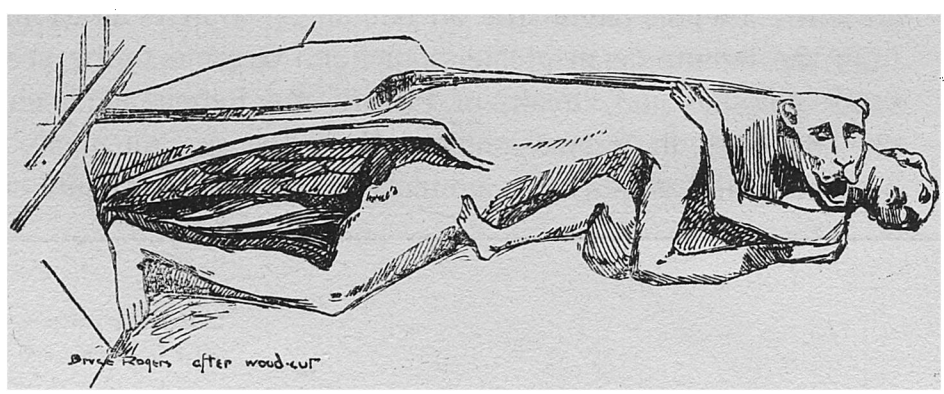
another type of natural gargoyle. We could only expect to find an animal of this kind in such a situation. He is sustaining himself with his claws and helping with his wings. Properly speaking, he should be grotesque or his appearance would not justify his occupation. Certainly it would be infinitely more grotesque to have a Venus-of-Milo-like figure in the attitude of discharging water from the roof of a mediæval structure.

It is well to bear in mind that these gargoyles were designed by the artists who carved them. Usually a rough block of stone with a channel in the top was provided. The artist took his tools to the scaffold, made a sketch of what he thought would appear best in that situation and proceeded to cut it. This was the method with most of the carving of that period. It is one of the traditions of Josselin that one of the saints was not pleased with the work of one of the artists and that she removed his gargoyle from the building during the night and placed it in the walls of the artist's house, which was some distance up the street, and where it is still to be seen. Its present position is rather incongruous, coming as it does out of a solid wall where it has no particular usefulness. Its presence there under the circumstances testifies to the truthfulness of this legend. The gargoyles in this part of the country are of granite and project very far from the wall, adding greatly to the picturesqueness of the streets in which they occur. Subsequent to the sixteenth century gargoyles lost their usefulness as a means of discharging water, and were used only in a decorative way.

LOUIS H. GIBSON



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